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Sociology of Education: Outlines Towards a Diagnosis and Thoughts on Some Major Challenges

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Sociology of education in Norway has traditionally been preoccupied with the classic problems related to education and the reproduction of social inequality. As the general social scientific and political focus on inequality decreased, the sociology of education also became less visible. At the same time, the sociology of youth evolved, and brought with it a shift from theories of reproduction towards theories of individualization and cultural detachment. New challenges for sociology of education are also discussed. These are related to the educational system's position as the main socialization arena for young people, as well as new developments within educational policy, and thus within school. What kind of identities are "produced" within the educational system?

Keywords: sociology of education, social inequality, sociology of youth, reproduction

The sociology of education is a very wide research field, and, as stated by Ball (2004), there is no single, unified, or stable discipline or intellectual project to which we can refer. It is therefore difficult to give a precise definition of what the sociology of education really "is" and therein separate the sociology of education from other sociological sub-disciplines. However, with a little help from Hammersley (1996), we can at least say that the sociology of education includes educational studies where social rather than psychological or biological explanatory factors are emphasized, that rely on research methods that were developed mainly within sociology (and anthropology), and that draw on sociological theories and literature. Sociologists of education focus on the educational institutions with the structures, processes, and patterns of interaction that take place within these (Ballantine, 1985).

Within Norwegian sociology of education, one particular research field has been especially prevalent: the influence education has when it comes to the life chances of different groups in society, which has also been pointed out by Haavelsrud (1984). According to Lauder, Brown, and Halsey (2009) this has been the key question that has structured the discipline over the past 40 years, also for sociologists of education throughout the rest of Europe and North America. After the Second World War, education has been a major priority in Norway and considerable resources have been put into the educational system. One of the main reasons behind these efforts was that education was considered an important tool within welfare politics in the sense that an increase in the populations' educational level would lead to economic growth and development—and to increased welfare—not only for the single individual, but also for society as a whole. Another explicit and related goal

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was increased equality across economic, cultural, regional, and gendered dividing lines. An increase in the population's education level was not only going to lead to increased welfare, but more social groups were to be a part of the welfare increase.

Research within the sociology of education in the 1960s, 1970s, and, in part, the 1980s had a focus on issues relating to education and social inequality. It had to do with inequality regarding educational choices and achievements of different groups in society, based on gender, ethnicity, geography, and social background variables. Researchers set out to document that there were systematic differences, and they attempted to explain these differences. The special interest for studying inequalities, for example relating to the recruitment to upper secondary and higher education, stems from the fact that equal educational rights has been an explicit goal of Norwegian educational policy, as shown by, for example, Aamodt (1994), when at the same time it became more and more obvious that the intentions of social leveling (equalization) and increased social mobility was not fulfilled—at least not to the extent and with the speed that one had anticipated. This discrepancy led to an increase in contributions from researchers based within the sociology of education that had a critical focus on the educational system as a producer and a reproducer of social, gendered, and geographical inequalities—pointing to the fact that the Norwegian educational reality was far from the intended goal of educational equality for all.

From the 1980s onward, the interest for studies of education and inequality decreased, both within the educational policy debate and among researchers (Aamodt, 1994). An empirical indication of this can be found in the decrease of journal articles published on the topic in the main Norwegian social scientific journal at the time, *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning*.¹ Since studies of education and inequality in many ways had constituted the sociology of education in Norway, the disinterest in such studies led to a downfall of the sub-discipline, as also pointed out by other researchers (for example, Aamodt, 1994; Sakslind, 2007). Aamodt (1994) sees this downfall as the result of important political currents at the time, where the political agenda was dominated by questions concerning effectiveness and freedom of choice. Social class analysis in a way became old fashioned and, thus, the sociology of education also became old fashioned. Birkelund (2002) also points out that in the 1990s we witnessed strong voices of anti-class criticism. She claims that representatives of class analysis had to defend the importance of class, while at the same time arguing for a weaker form of class than previously advocated. Also, based on empirical analyses Colbjørnsen, Birkelund, Hernes, and Knudsen (1987) argue that social class was not the most important differentiator in Norway in the 1980s, and they therefore questioned the importance of class for identity and inequality. Thus, the subject matter that used to constitute the main issue for sociology of education in Norway—education and social inequality—became less interesting, and instead the focus turned to issues having to do with the effectiveness and resource allocations of the educational system, and studies of educational choices and educational careers were carried out in order to evaluate the efficiency of the educational system (Aamodt, 1994). Also, according to Aamodt, the researchers themselves

¹While 9% of the articles published in the 1970s in this journal can be classified under the heading “education and inequality,” this number decreased to 2–3% in the 1980s and 1990s, and the number remained low until the beginning of 2000. In the other main sociological journal in Norway, *Sosiologisk tidsskrift*, established in 1993, the number of articles on education and inequality was correspondingly low.

started to regard the subject matter as somewhat exhausted, both empirically and theoretically.

From Reproduction to Sociology of Youth

The focus on educational inequalities that the sociology of education initially had in Norway implied that, at a theoretical level, theories of reproductive mechanisms were most prevalent. However, the voices of social theorists claiming that central characteristics of our time are increased differentiation, mobility, and more possibilities for the individuals' themselves to plan their lives, became louder (for example, Beck, 1999; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Ziehe, 1993; Ziehe & Stubenrauch, 1983). Young people's identities are understood through concepts such as individualization and "makeability," as we find them presented by among others Ulrich Beck (Beck, 1999, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and Thomas Ziehe (Ziehe, 1993; Ziehe & Stubenrauch, 1983). Individuals in late-modernity are liberated from established cultural structures. Social forms that used to be important, such as, for example, social class, religion, traditions, gender roles, or family structures, are disintegrating and dissolved. Therefore, individuals must themselves create and stage their own lives, their own life biographies and the social ties and networks that are going to surround them.

Such perspectives found special resonance within the sociology of youth, and the downturn within sociology of education has happened as the sociology of youth has been advancing in Norway. In 2001 the scientific journal *Tidsskrift for ungdomsforskning* [Norwegian Journal of Youth Research] was established. The sociology of youth brought with it a fresh new outlook on the diversity among youth and showed strength and innovation in employing new sociological theories as well as developing and introducing new concepts and ideas. On the other hand, the sociology of youth has been criticized for lacking a focus on school and education (see, among others, Haavelsrud, 1984; Heggen, 1996; Staf-seng, 1996a, 1996b, 2002). One would often start out with accounting for what constitutes the late-modern concept of youth, and the aspect of adolescence as a time for qualification and education would often be put forward. Young people spend most of their time within the educational system and not in a work situation or at the arenas' of the local communities. However, after emphasizing this, school and education would often vanish from the further analyses. This tendency has been clear also in the selection of articles published in the aforementioned journal, with less than 19% of the articles published during 2001–2010 treating school and education as a central study parameter.² According to Staf-seng (1996b) it is a scientific and a pedagogical problem that recent research on youth has evolved in such a way that it has been left on the outside of school. He claims that within youth research there is a dualistic view between what is the "real" or "authentic" life of youth, on the one hand, versus school and education, on the other. Through historic perspectives on the evolution of youth as a specific life phase, Staf-seng shows that this life phase and the scientific understanding of youth were products of school and educational reforms (Staf-seng, 1996a, 1996b). This distance between the sociology of education and the sociology of youth is not only a Norwegian problem. The generality of this observation is pointed out by for example Dwyer and Wyn (2001).

²Out of this 19%, almost half of the articles were quantitative presentations of recent statistics on issues connected to youth, published under the heading "New numbers about youth."

After the first fascination with the new and exciting theories of individualization and cultural detachment was over, there seems to have been a return to, and an upswing for, the focus on education and inequality in the new millennium. Of course, some researchers never left their focus on social differences in educational attainment, for example Birkelund (2006) and Hansen (2005). One of the reasons for this upswing is probably that national and international research revealed several discouraging facts concerning the situation in Norwegian schools: Norwegian schools attain mediocre to poor results on a variety of measures of school quality; social background has a strong effect on attainment levels; and many Norwegian classrooms are characterized by noise and disturbance and poorly motivated and undisciplined pupils (Jensen & Turmo, 2003; Lie, Kjærnsli, Røe, & Turmo, 2001; OECD, 2001; Solheim, Tønnesen, & Oftedal, 2002). According to Hansen (2005) this situation came as a surprise to some of the social commentators in Norway. Also, in relation to this, and as pointed out by Hansen (2005, p. 38), information on school results has become more easily accessible during the past years and, as a consequence, research on attainment differences has been more comprehensive. In addition to the PISA-studies, national studies have been published, where among other things reading skills among second graders and school leaving grades from lower- and upper-secondary school have been documented, and also since 2004 the national tests in reading, English and mathematics have been conducted among all 5th and 8th graders in Norway. It has been well documented that social background variables have an effect on school attainment in Norway also in the new millennium. In the aftermath of these revelations, researchers have also studied the relationship between school and home, and have shown that there is a distance between home and school, especially among parents from low social backgrounds (Bæck, 2009, 2010a, 2010b).

School as a Socialising and Identity Forming Arena

Education has become more and more prominent as the main activity for young people, and, as pointed out by Frønes (1997), the educational system is, aside from the family, the social institution that most directly structures modern childhood socially and ideologically. "Post-industrial society has transformed childhood and socialization through the increasing domination of educational systems and the educational culture, rooted not only in a demand for qualifications, but in the hegemonic position of a competitive educational system," Frønes states (p. 22). In all, 81% of all 15–19-year-olds in Norway in the year 2010 had education as their main activity, while less than 11% were in full-time employment. As more and more young people spend more and more time within the educational system, it is reasonable to believe that this arena gains significance as the most important arena for the socialization of young people—for identity forming processes and development of norms and values. This will be the case even if the school system itself does not have this as a priority for the activities that go on in school. This implies that monitoring schools' activities, contents, and goals becomes an important endeavor for researchers. It becomes important to question what kind of identities young people develop in school. What kind of values, norms, and culture are transferred by the schools to the new generations? Which identities are young people developing within the educational system? Knudsen (1994) has also pointed out the need for more research on the socialization effects of education. He claims that as an increasingly bigger proportion of the population are completing higher education, it becomes important to ask how the years spent on education are forming individual identities and values. What consequences will it have for individuals and groups that a substantial

amount of time during their most formative years is spent within educational institutions? According to Knudsen, it is a fundamental sociological thesis that an increased educational level will change peoples' interests and ways of being and living. If this is the case, the education explosion could have several fundamental, long-term consequences exceeding beyond the increase in formal competence and formal qualifications itself.

The fundamental logic that constitutes the motor behind the goals and activities that take place within the educational system lies at the core of school as a socializing and an identity-forming arena. Across Europe there has been an increased focus on education as a means for the realization of economic policies and goals. At a policy level there is little doubt that the fundamental function of the educational system today is the production of a work force that fit a specific economic system, as also have been pointed out by a number of scholars (for example, Karlsen, 2006, 2007; Thuen, 2010). According to Karlsen (2007) the driving force behind educational policy today is the idea of optimizing human resources—human capital—in order to succeed in the new and global economic system. This represents a fundamentally different starting point than an alternative focus on nurturing the whole of the individual.

Karlsen (2006) claims that from the 1980s onwards, the human capital perspective in education has become incorporated not only within policy documents and at the macro level, but also increasingly at the micro and institutional levels. Educational institutions and business enterprises are perceived as similar organizations, subject to the same guiding principles, which means that the logic of the market is employed in order to make educational institutions more effective (Karlsen, 2006). This implies, according to Karlsen, that the student is no longer the focus of educational policy (see also Løvlie, 1997; Slagstad, 2000) and that educational policy is no longer motivated by the needs of students, their situation, life conditions, and living environments. Thus, self-development and identity formation seem to be of less relevance for the educational field, and the focus on the individual, on the individual's life project, and individual choices seems to be diminishing. If one is onboard with the idea that educational policy, and thus the educational system, has an increased focus on economic competition and neo-liberal values, as claimed by Karlsen (2006) and also by Thuen (2010), which identities are young people developing within the educational system? How does this relate to recent sociological theories about the late-modern individual and the emphasis on individual life projects and individual choices? A paradox seems to present itself: in the prevalent sociological theories about being young, the emphasis is on increased individuality and freedom of choice, while in the most important identity-forming arena for young people, the individual seems to disappear more and more.

German sociologist Martin Baethge claims, on the other hand, that the development within the educational system is an important source of individualization (Baethge, 1992; Baethge, Hantsche, Pelull, & Voskamp, 1988). As young people spend more and more time on educational arenas, which therefore become the primary fields of experience, separated from working life and other parts of life as well, schools will play a more important role as a socialization arena. Baethge therefore points to a shift from a work-related life style to an educationally determined life style, and, the way he sees it, school and work are socializing along totally different logics, which will have an effect on the development, actions, and attitudes among the young. Young people today are making their educational and occupational choices at a later stage in life than previously, and learning and work take place separate from each other. The way Baethge sees it, school represents a sanctuary for the young, a place separated from the requirements and demands of the external world—a psychosocial

moratorium. Compared to working life, different norms are valid in the psychosocial moratorium; the norm of economic rationality is not a dominating one in his view, and the individual is allowed to make mistakes once in a while. The educational system is “producing” individuals who are used to having themselves at the centre, and who are living lives that are predominately oriented inwards and towards one’s own self. This is very different from the world of work that, according to Baethge, is oriented outwards, towards nature and the surroundings. Baethge claims therefore that it has been a shift from a productionist to a consumerist pattern of socialisation, where work and consumption represent different and to some extent contradictory points of reference. As a result, Baethge claims, young people today spend a longer period of time in a situation that contributes to the development of an individual rather than a collective code of conduct and of individual patterns of identity. The result is that youth identities are related to concepts such as individualization and subject orientation.

A number of other scholars have also pointed out the link between school and individualization processes (for example, Beck, 2000; Frønes, 1997; Illeris, Katznelson, Simonsen, & Ulriksen, 2002), and Ulrich Beck claims that the effects of the educational system can hardly be overestimated when it comes to this development. He claims that one of the most striking features with what he calls the second modernity, is the collective desire the individuals have for living “*a life of one’s own*... This individualized horizon of meaning has not fallen from the skies, nor has it taken root and grown as an individual hope in the hearts of all men and women,” says Beck (Beck, 2000, p. 53, emphasis added). It represents a deep historical-cultural change that has made people the authors of their own lives, and the expansion of education has been an important motor in this regard.

However, there is reason to be somewhat critical when it comes to the perspectives on adolescence as a life phase characterized predominantly through the individualized self. Young people do not guide all actions and all choices with reference to their own self-realization and self-developmental projects. Adolescence is also a time when the individual sees itself through the eyes of the other, perhaps more so than in most other life phases. Talcott Parsons (1951) claims that being young and doing educational activities is a time when the focus on the individual is actually low. In this period of life it is especially important to be part of social groups, and it is especially difficult to stand alone. As pointed out by a number of researchers (for example, Frønes, 1998; Ryan, 2001), the peer group is an important factor for the socialization processes that take place during adolescence. According to Ryan (2001), schools and classrooms are inherently social places, and it therefore seems likely that peers have an important influence on adolescents’ achievements, beliefs, and behaviors in school. The way Ryan sees it, peer groups are particularly important during early-adolescence because the amount of time they spend with their peers increases relative to that spent with their parents and other adults. Also, peer relationships during this period of life are viewed as more influential than those formed during childhood. As also pointed out by Ryan, several studies have found an increase in individuals’ need for conformity in the early adolescent years, followed by a steady decline in that need in later adolescence, which means that young adolescents may be particularly susceptible to peer group influence.

Instead of individual life projects, therefore, an alternative outcome of the prolonged time period spent within educational institutions could be homogenization and standardization, in the sense that the young are socialized into a rather similar set of norms and values. Which set of norms and values would this be, then? A common perception has been that schools transfer the norms and values of the middle classes (for example, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In Norway, for example, educational reforms have made vocational education and training

more formal and more theoretical, and researchers have therefore claimed that working-class professions have become subject to middle-class ideals (Halvorsen, 1994). However, an alternative hypothesis is launched by Anton Hoëm (2001). He claims that we are all learning a popular culture, and it is this popular culture that is becoming more and more dominant within society, and also within school. Hoëm suggests that the popular culture supersedes the classical culture as the prevailing cultural foundation in society and in school. Popular culture is decreasingly attached to nations or to social class, and a consequence is that the different social classes and ethnic groups have a more equal starting point regarding their possibilities to succeed in school. Up until now, having a background in a social layer where, for example, literature is a part of everyday life, has constituted an educational advantage since this has represented the culture dominant in school. To the extent that a socially unrestrained popular culture supersedes a class specific culture, the students will, at least culturally speaking, set out with equal opportunities when it comes to knowledge acquirement, Hoëm claims, and it will not be necessary to take into consideration differences related to class, ethnicity, or nationality.

The educational system is, of course, already filled with the interests and values of “commoners.” The teachers, for example, are recruited from all walks of life. However, it seems a bit hasty to celebrate the end of the educational system as a mechanism in the reproduction of social inequality. A number of recent studies have only confirmed the findings from the classic study of Paul Willis (1977) and demonstrated the continued relevance of the theoretical outlines of scholars such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), for example Bæck’s (2009, 2010a) and Lareau’s (2000, 2003) studies of social class differences in parental involvement and intervention. This does not mean that studies within the sociology of education should be limited to social reproduction issues in the conventional sense. At the same time, there is a need for analyses focusing on the consequences of the ideological changes within the educational system, as described above, on socialization and identity-forming processes, as well as on the consequences of such shifts when it comes to knowledge production and the role of the school system as a societal institution. The relationship between family factors and school is also crucial, and needs to be viewed in light of these developments as well as in light of other societal developments and with a wider outlook than the classic perspectives have represented. Recent studies focusing on both expected and unexpected educational outcomes among working-class children, for example, provide a promising and exciting new outlook on the significance of home and family factors (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010), and at the same time demonstrate the necessity of theoretical perspectives that open up for mobility and change.

Conclusion

The educational system integrates and differentiates. On the one hand, it integrates different groups of the population by letting them take part in the same knowledge foundation. On the other hand, it differentiates individuals by ranking and classifying students based on their performances and achievements. These are inherent functions of the educational system. School opens up and closes opportunities for further education and for work, and in this way it affects later status, income, and work conditions for the individuals. The problem appears once we are able to document, or at least to present as plausible, that the educational system also serves to produce and to reproduce inequalities based on, for example, social

background factors. The sociology of education has had, and still must have, an important task in this regard.

A concluding diagnosis for the situation within the sociology of education in Norway is that it finds itself in an unpleasant squeeze between a sociology of youth that largely ignores the importance of education in young people's lives and prevailing trends within educational policy that view the educational system as primarily a means to an end within economic politics. The social democratic goal of increased equalization has largely been replaced by trends from European educational policy that, at its best, has toned down the intentions of leveling out social differences. As emphasized elsewhere (Karlsen, 2001) it becomes especially important to draw attention to processes connected to social inequality in a time where the prevailing stories point out that everyone is the architect of one's own fortune. Focusing on the educational arena is especially important because it is so decisive for the life chances and life trajectories of individuals. The old reproductive focus that the sociology of education used to have is still relevant, even though it needs to take into account the new complexities of late-modern society. It is an important challenge for the sociology of education to develop concepts that enable us to understand and deal with such processes. Also, the distance between the sociology of education and the sociology of youth is unfortunate and regrettable because it is obvious that a closer connection between the two sub-disciplines could serve fruitful for both camps: a stronger focus on school as a socialization arena for young people could provide valuable insights into youth research, and the traditional reproduction perspectives still dominant within the sociology of education could profit from opening up for the sociology of youth's ideas on heterogeneity and sub-cultural aspects.

Pierre Bourdieu never gave up his project of revealing the mechanisms related to the reproduction of social inequality. According to him, sociology's primary task is to reveal the structures deepest hidden in the different social worlds that constitute the social universe, as well as the mechanisms that ensure the prolongation and conversion of these structures (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1995). And, since the educational system plays such a fundamental role in these processes, sociological study of education is of basic significance for many other areas within society too.

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